

The world is made up of many different countries, cultures and peoples. Yet despite all these differences, they all have one important thing in common:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” This is what it says in the very first Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10 December 1948. The notion of human rights has become one of the most important in the history of humankind.

But what exactly are human rights? Who is responsible for protecting them? And do they really apply to all people?

We describe human rights as those rights which apply to every single person simply because s/he is a human being. They are innate. Human rights apply to every person in every part of the world, without exception. They are therefore universal.

They also apply equally to every-one regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, skin colour, age or other features that may distinguish one person from another.

Human rights are part of international law. The UN Charter of 1945 already contained important passages on the meaning and protection of human rights.

The first proper international agreement was the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

In 1966 the UN adopted two more International Covenants – one on Civil and Political Rights and the other on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. These declarations are collectively known as the International Bill of Human Rights, and are the most important legal basis for human rights.

In addition there is a whole series of UN Conventions– for example, the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention against Torture or recently the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

But what are the specific human rights anchored in these Conventions?

Human rights are often divided into three generations or dimensions.

The first dimension: the classic political and civil liberty rights. These include the right to life and physical integrity. A ban on slavery and forced labour. Protection from torture. Freedom

of thought, conscience and religion. A comprehensive ban on discrimination. And the right to vote.

The second dimension: The economic, social and cultural human rights. These include the right to work and to a decent wage. The right to form trade unions. Equality between men and women. The protection of families, pregnant women, mothers and children. The right to a decent standard of living, including the right to adequate food. The right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The right to education or the right to participate in cultural life.

The third dimension deals with the rights of groups: It includes the right to self-determination. The right to development. The right to a clean environment and the right to peace.

The principle of the indivisibility of human rights is important. That means: None of the rights listed in the political, economic and social and cultural human rights may have precedence over the others. Human rights can only be consummated when all facets work together. The exercise of civil and political rights depends on the safeguarding of economic, social and cultural rights – and vice versa.

And who exactly has the job of implementing and upholding human rights?

Countries carry the main responsibility for safeguarding human rights. They are obliged to refrain from any action that would violate human rights. They must protect human rights from violation. And where the necessary conditions are not in place for people fully to exercise their human rights, these must be created.

The UN's central body is the Human Rights Council, a body of 47 countries, based in Geneva. It reviews the situation on human rights on a regular basis in all of the UN member states. It can also send independent experts (Special Rapporteurs) to individual countries. The Problem: there are many countries on the Council which do not themselves uphold human rights.

The UN Security Council concerns itself particularly with the protection of human rights during wars and armed conflicts. For example, it works to end the recruitment of child soldiers.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights is responsible for coordinating the human rights work of the entire UN body. She has local offices in all parts of the world and can second human rights experts to UN peace missions.

The International Criminal Court in The Hague (ICC). With its establishment in 1998, the world now has an authority capable of investigating and passing sentence on particularly grave breaches of human rights – genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Its powers are still limited now. It lacks the support of important countries like the USA and China. But a crucial step has been taken: war criminals can no longer commit their transgressions with impunity.

Along with the global institutes of the UN, there are various regional human rights agreements and bodies. The European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights. The American Convention on Human Rights.

Civil society has an especially important role to play.

Non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch monitor the observance of human rights in places all over the world. They draw attention to abuses and exert pressure on governments through their public campaigns. They also play their part in the ongoing development of the legal basis for human rights.

The creation of independent national institutes for human rights, which have an indispensable role as watchdogs, is also important.

Are there any controversial aspects about Human Rights as well?

Yes, there are two main points of contention:

Issue number one: The Universal nature of human rights.

The argument: The notion of human rights originates in the West and cannot simply be transferred to other cultures.

It is true: The development and spread of the notion of Human Rights carry the marks of cultural developments and traditions.

But it is also true that no human being wants to be tortured or discriminated against because of her religion or skin colour. Every human being wants to be able to speak his opinion without fear of persecution. Every human being wants a life of dignity with a roof over her head, without having to suffer hunger or thirst. All these ideas are included in the notion of the universality of human rights.

It is noticeable that it is frequently countries or groups which are themselves responsible for human rights violations that call this universality into question.

Issue number two:

Western countries are accused of using human rights as a pretext for military intervention in other countries and of committing human rights abuses themselves.

It is clear: No country is the natural guardian of human rights. Human rights are violated in western countries, too. Especially following the attacks of 9/11, measures were introduced that compromised human rights. The justification: The War on Terrorism.

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We see that human rights are very particular rights. They apply equally to every individual. Respect for and protection of human rights must be at the heart of government activity, since human beings are both the reason for and object of every policy. People do not exist for the state, but the state for people. The struggle to secure and defend human rights must be continually renewed. For we can only secure permanent peace and stability if we respect human rights.